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Marine spy probes too big for Pentagon, Lehman says

✓ By Bill Gertz
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Former Navy Secretary John Lehman said yesterday the Marine embassy spy cases have gotten too big for the Pentagon to handle.

Mr. Lehman said he would prefer that the Justice Department handle the sex-and-espionage cases against Marine embassy security guards. The cases grew out of the investigation into alleged misconduct by Sgt. Clayton J. Lonetree.

"The problem began to arise as the investigation proceeded in the Lonetree case," Mr. Lehman said in his first interview since leaving office April 10. "As more and more people were implicated, it just began to be too big for the Defense Department to handle."

The Naval Investigative Service began investigating U.S. Marine guards at the Moscow Embassy last December, concentrating on present and former enlisted men from the Moscow detachment.

Sgt. Lonetree and Cpl. Arnold Bracy have been charged with spying for allegedly allowing Soviet agents inside the Moscow embassy.

A third Marine has been charged with unauthorized contacts with a Soviet woman, and a fourth Marine is being held on suspicion of spying during a tour of duty at the U.S. Consulate in Leningrad in 1981.

Since military courts take years in some cases to conduct a court-martial, "it may well be that Justice is the appropriate agency to take it over," Mr. Lehman said.

His remarks contrasted sharply with his previous criticism of the Justice Department's plea bargain in the spy case against John A. Walker and his Navy son Michael.

Yesterday, Mr. Lehman repeated his charge that the Justice Department tends to treat espionage cases lightly and said spying "should not be treated as just another white-collar crime."

But he also attacked the U.S. Navy's lenient treatment of past espionage cases as "unacceptable."

"In the case of espionage, it is my strongly held belief that espionage is a crime of the worst kind because it threatens the lives and security of every American," he said.

In 1985, Mr. Lehman created a firestorm of controversy for his remarks about the Walker plea agreement. Walker was given a life term and will be eligible for parole

in 1996. His son received a 25-year term.

"I still feel just as strongly as I did when I spoke out on it," the former Navy secretary said. "But I've since come to learn that it is not just the Justice Department that has that bureaucratic tendency. 'We in the Navy... were sometimes just as bad or worse.'"

Justice Department statistics show that since 1975 nine Navy-related espionage cases other than those involving the Walker spy ring have ended with seven spies receiving prison terms of five years or less.

"That's just unacceptable," Mr. Lehman said. "I think the death penalty is appropriate for those convicted — found guilty — of espionage."

Mr. Lehman expressed bitter disappointment with the final outcome of the Walker case. John Walker and his son both failed polygraph, or lie-detector, tests, which he said indicates the two convicted spies did not fulfill their agreement to cooperate with U.S. officials in a damage assessment.

Also, the Walkers were allowed to retain large amounts of cash paid to them by the Soviets for the most important U.S. Navy secrets obtained through espionage activities going back to the 1960s.

"They broke their terms of the

plea bargain, and nothing has been done about it," Mr. Lehman said.

He said the Walker spy ring assisted the Soviets in dramatically improving their submarine warfare capabilities.

Through the Walkers and their Navy friend Jerry A. Whitworth, who also was convicted, the Soviets learned the details of U.S. anti-submarine warfare techniques and were able to build much quieter submarines that are much harder for U.S. sub-chasers to detect.

"They've done that so effectively that their new generation of subs is as quiet as the subs we were building six or eight years ago," he said. "That's a huge improvement."

On the State Department's role in recent security problems, Mr. Lehman said the cases resulted from "running government activities through procedure, rather than human accountability."

The solution to tightening security and developing responsible counterespionage rests with hiring better people for counterintelligence and security functions and providing more career incentives, he said.

"There's just a disincentive to uncover nastiness, because people tend to shoot the messenger," Mr. Lehman said.